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Significant Assets of Effective Teachers of Adult Reading

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A basic consideration in selecting teachers of adult nonreaders should be the characteristics of the adult nonreader. While training and experience are essential, the most desirable characteristics of the effective teacher do not necessarily require degrees, certificates, or coursework. An awareness of the adult nonreader's attitudes, temperaments, motivations, family background, potentialities, and ultimate goals should enable the teacher to cope with the student's needs. This should be strengthened by the teacher's personal qualities: (1) acceptance of his own strengths, weaknesses, and responsibilities, (2) a genuine appreciation of the student's interests, needs, and accomplishments, (3) a wide range of interests, (4) compassion and empathy, and (5) fairness to all students. The greatest potential, however, could be the former students of adult education classes who succeeded while retaining insight into the problems and hopes of functional illiterates. (NS)

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Significant Assets of Effective Teachers of Adult Reading

While my position is not unique in the true sense of the word, it is sufficiently near it in terms of frequency of occurrence that I have claimed some liberties in making this presentation.

First, I will not offer apology for any reference to personal experience as I proceed. Although there may be some near-valid reasons for my listing in the various Who's Who publications and the Dictionary of International Biography, my best recommendation for appearing in this setting is that I was a high school dropout, necessitating my becoming a student in adult education classes when I finally got around to recognition of my educational need. Moreover, I had become convinced by my teachers that I was not capable of succeeding in school. Frankly, I was counseled out of high school with the understanding that I would be better off trying to get and hold a job.

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The second assumption I make is that my lack of actual teaching years in adult education (which might be considered one of the components of expertise in teaching) may have its compensation in time spent in the student role as an adult learner in a variety of settings. I was "taught" to be a shipfitter; to be a welder; to clean tank cars--from the inside; to be supervisor of small boys at a county-operated boys ranch; to be a Salvation Army officer; to work at trimming small molded rubber parts for Gates Rubber Company; to sell handbags for the Emporium in San Francisco; to operate an apple-paring machine; to be a WAC, and in that role to be a clerk typist and then chaplain's assistant, among other things--and successfully, too, I presume, since I received promotions and left those jobs of my own volition because I was extremely dissatisfied.

Third, as Director of Reading in a high school situated in a relatively disadvantaged area in which I have also had rewarding experiences in teaching adults, I see numerous similarities in the problems teachers face in teaching reading at these two levels of physical maturity and therefore believe that teacher selection and training for the two roles might have some useful parallels.

My fourth assumption is that my own experience as a teacher of the educationally handicapped is a reasonable reservoir from which to draw some insights as to the makeup of the individuals in those classes.

The Adult Student: Basis for Teacher Selection

It seems entirely reasonable to me to assume that the characteristics of the adults to be taught will be the dominant factor in the selection of

teachers for such programs and that content will, of necessity, be secondary in importance, although the degree of difference between these two priorities may be extremely slight.

In California the California Committee on Basic Education defines the functional illiterate as having achieved a fifth grade education. The United States Bureau of Census' rule of thumb used in determining the extent of illiteracy among adults of the United States is fourth grade. The illiterate, however, as differentiated from the functional illiterate, is one who cannot read or write in any language, one who lacks sufficient skill to read, write, or speak in English at the fifth grade level.

There appear to be four stages of adult education which must be mastered by adults who want to obtain an education eventually and the first two stages are generally considered basic education, comprising an introductory and an elementary approach. Reading instruction is most crucial at the basic education levels and therefore this is where I would like to focus.

I maintain that the characteristics of the adult student should dominate the selection of the teacher and that teacher's continuing education, but it seems imperative that the field be narrowed to this particular instructional level in order to get at specific characteristics. The mature student, whether in high school or in the out-of-school population, who needs beginning instruction in reading differs greatly from the student of the same physical maturity who has some ability to acquire meaning from printed symbols already and to inscribe those same symbols in a way that permits others to draw meaning from them.

Adult Beginning Readers: What Are They?

It cannot be emphasized too greatly that adult students who are in need of basic reading instruction often have extremely negative attitudes that must be overcome before they can learn. The teachers, therefore, must have an awareness of such attitudes and be prepared to cope with them.

Concerning negative attitudes about school, it should not be surprising to note a deep-seated fear of, or suspicion of, plus contempt for schools. Nor should feelings of inadequacy because of their lack of formal schooling and the embarrassment that goes along with such feelings come as a surprise to the teacher. It should be obvious that previous schooling, if any, was inadequate. Others succeeded; this adult did not; therefore the fault must be in the student--his perception of the situation may be erroneous, but must be accepted as valid and dealt with. Moreover, many adults have been away from school for a long time and in fact may have had little or no formal schooling. The teacher must be able to help them "save face" to the extent that they can believe that success is possible. If there is anything the teachers must keep in mind it is that they deserve respect and are to be treated as mature adults. They may already have a considerable burden of home, church and community responsibilities carried equally as well as the college graduate on the other side of town and with as much concern. Above all, they are individuals and as such they have a multiplicity of personal, educational, and vocational experiences (which may include unemployment). They are sure to differ widely among themselves in age, job experiences, social background, motivations for study, and in ultimate goals.

Their families probably include a wife and children and they often come from one-parent homes. They may have other extremely heavy responsibilities competing with education for their time and interests. They may well appear to be listless, downtrodden, beaten, defeated--without any vestige of hope, self respect, or faith in either themselves or humanity. But they may also be just the opposite.

While they actually may have achieved little in terms of formal education, they must be assumed to have some potentialities. The teacher of these students must know and have an empathy with the fact that their needs are many and that they may need help in setting realistic occupational goals. They need and usually appreciate the teacher's friendly interest, praise when actually earned, and a combination of patience and encouragement.

It is only when we have looked at the student who will be taught in the adult reading class that we begin to have some indication of the kind of teacher who is most likely to meet his needs. Obviously there can be no in-service training until a selection has been made initially. I firmly maintain that the selection of the teacher is paramount in importance and state without reservation that the teacher should be selected for the task rather than the reverse.

The Adult Beginning Reader: Who Should Teach Him?

Ideally, I suppose I would look for someone with training and experience as an elementary school teacher, and with some concentration on remediation problems at the elementary level, a teacher who has been successful in meeting the needs of a student with whom others could do nothing by virtue

of being willing to try unorthodox, untried methods and techniques. I would seek the teacher who is not oriented to lecture courses, as is the secondary school teacher. I would look for evidence of sympathy for the student--one who, almost as second nature tries to feel what the student is feeling as he succeeds or fails. I would search for one who does not lean on a course of study, but who can use one effectively.

The fact that I serve as volunteer consultant in education and psychology for one foreign mission board leads me to add another quality which I believe is one of the bases for the kind of success missionaries seem to experience in dealing with literacy problems: I call it compassion, and I do not believe it is out of place in the adult classroom. Then, if in addition to this, empathy can be substituted for sympathy, it might even be possible to skip the in-service training, for it is quite likely that this teacher is going to search continually for whatever is needed to help the student.

However, this being something other than Utopia, it may be necessary to look for someone with lesser qualifications than these. It may be necessary to look for retired teachers seeking part-time employment, former teachers who are now homemakers, foremen in industry who have had to teach new employees how to do the required work, and to have the retiring adult teacher remain alert and watchful for persons who might fill his job acceptably.

Probably the goldmine with the greatest potential, though, is the host of former adult students who have become well educated--who were well taught in a course as an adult and who have continued their education successfully while retaining considerable insight into the problems and hopes of other

adult students. Moreover, volunteers with good general education who simply wish to help a little often turn out to be valuable assistants in the classroom. I would not overlook peer instruction possibilities within the class wherein each shares his strengths to shore up the weaknesses of others.

In California it is assumed that professional training for participation in adult education activities should include a Batchelor Degree, or equivalent, or three years of college, plus special training in teaching reading and other basic subjects, preferably primary. In fact, this (reading emphasis) is mandatory. Course work in principles and methods and materials of adult education are required by state law. Training in teaching of reading is mandatory, even for the teaching of general adult basic education courses. Training in teaching of spelling, penmanship and arithmetic is desirable. Training or experience in counseling and guidance is helpful but not required.

A knowledge of subject matter and of a variety of approaches to the different learning needs of a classroom full of students is, perhaps, essential. But it seems obvious to me that some desirable characteristics of the person who effectively teaches adults to read are far removed from the world of degrees earned, certificates held, and course work covered prior to entry into teaching. Maybe the most desirable teacher characteristics actually BEGIN with enthusiasm, warmth of personality and sincerity, followed closely by a wide range of interests plus a propensity for fairness in all dealings with all students, and linked to a genuine appreciation of student interests and accomplishments. Certainly they have much to do with

the degree to which an adult student will be willing to entrust himself and his learning needs to the teacher's wisdom and direction.

Another distinct asset, of course, will undoubtedly be freedom in terms of time to do the teaching job and to be available to students. And who can say how important will be the matter of patience with the problems peculiar to those slow beginning periods of learning?

Acceptance: Key to Effectiveness

When I look for a teacher for my own reading program, I usually prefer the teacher who admits that he doesn't know how to teach reading. He knows he will be expected to accept training and I always plan to train my teachers on the job. However, at the same time, I look for one who has an awareness of himself and who does not need to have standardized measurement "success" to know he is a good teacher. I call this acceptance, and my own reading program involvements lead me to believe that this might be the simplest terminology for the entire spectrum of teacher-qualifications for a successful reading class comprised of adults.

The teacher must be accepted by the student and if he is not, he need not waste his time going through the motions of teaching no matter how many courses he expresses willingness to take. Such acceptance, however, usually comes about because the student himself meets with acceptance on the part of the teacher who takes the adult beginning reader as he is, assesses the raw material with which he has the privilege of working, and ascertains the first step toward making that adult a functional literate. But beyond this the teacher must be ready to accept the fact that he may see no measurable gains for some time, or that he may see some gain immediately for some and seemingly never for others. Yet, he does not

become frustrated or discouraged, but rather is simply compelled into other method, material, and technique which he has not yet tried with his "temporary failure." In essence, he is able to accept himself as a teacher even though he would not want to be measured as a teacher by what the student has achieved at any given point in time. Moreover, he is able to accept a variation of pace equal to the variation between students as an absolute necessity. (In-service education must help him in this or the in-service program fails him.)

Such a teacher will be able to create the necessary classroom atmosphere which will promote self-confidence and a desire for self-improvement on the part of each adult student to the end that learning to read becomes a desirable and pleasurable activity. Obviously, though, no two teachers will use the same approaches in creating the desired psychological climate, but it is the effect that is essential. The adult learner must realize that he is learning something at every meeting of the class, something that he considers to be worthwhile and important. Once again, it is his perception which constitutes reality to him. An in-service program must help the teacher to become sensitive to this need.

It is commonly accepted that classroom activity must recognize certain adult needs, including the fact that adult learners must see immediate benefits for themselves, must actually want the instruction, require specific, concrete, practical, lifelike situations, and must enjoy the instruction or have some satisfaction from it every class period.

It should be obvious that effective teaching requires an ego-centric curriculum for the adult learner, which is the totality of my message, and there are some ways of bringing this about through in-service education.

It would seem that the most effective in-service education program for any reading program must be problem centered to be immediately effective. The Mt. Diablo School District ran a summer session reading program in two different schools last year in which practical experiences of teaching were the morning's agenda followed by afternoon classes for college credit in which the morning's teaching wrinkles were ironed out and plans were made for the next day's morning task. Although only six teachers were employed at half salary, there were three times that number actually working in the classes as volunteers and the reason for this was the fact that the teachers were eager to relate classroom training to practical experience. Perhaps a clue to the value they placed on it is the fact that not one word about grading was uttered until the course reached the halfway mark, and at that point, I introduced the subject to them. Moreover, the volunteers were supposed to sign up for a specific number of hours in the classroom setting, but all ended up putting in the same time as did the paid participants and they seemed thrilled with the opportunity.

This is the manner in which I teach my teachers in my school and break in volunteers in the evening school when I teach adults. I want them to have experience in following a lesson plan which I prepare minute by minute almost for the first day. Then, when school is out, we look at the problems that developed and make preparations for the following day based on the first day's work. The opportunity to share concerns immediately after the problem experience arises is an essential element of good in-service training. It is the personal involvement of the teacher in seeking answers which make in-service education worthwhile. Since the in-service program

for the teacher of reading can only be as effective as the depth of the teacher's desire to participate in such a program, I recommend that the TEACHERS' curriculum be ego-centric in nature, also, and that if this is not possible for some reason, perhaps postponement might be more valuable than forging ahead to a dead end.

A program of teacher-education must include psychological services to the teacher; must be an assistance rather than a burden to him; must provide monetary compensation for his investment of time or some other tangible incentive for extra hours--perhaps a salary schedule rather than an hourly rate with increments for professional growth specifically related to his role in adult education; access to (and a budget that permits purchase of) new materials.

Much may be said of various other approaches to in-service education for effective reading programs, but since these have been described again and again in such settings as this and in the literature, I prefer to leave my discussion focused on the need for an ego-centric curriculum for the adult beginning reader and a plea for an ego-centric in-service training program for the teacher who will teach him. I reaffirm my position that the teacher should be selected for the task (should actually <u>seek</u> the job) and then be assisted in meeting classroom needs through a continuous problem-centered in-service education program. But I cannot resist the temptation to add that I think it well worth the search to find a teacher who can utilize empathy and genuine compassion as the vehicle for ushering the adult student into the world of literacy.

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